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California Faculty Association
Joint Committee on the Master Plan for Higher Education
March 22, 2010 Testimony on "Accountability"

My name is John Travis, and I chair the Political Action and Legislative Committee of the California Faculty Association. CFA represents the 23,000 faculty, counselors, coaches and librarians who teach at the California State University.

Thank you Chair Ruskin for inviting CFA to speak today. "Accountability" is an issue CFA strongly supports, and for which the CSU – we feel – is sadly lacking. We appreciate the committee's focus on this issue.

Past discussions of accountability at the CSU have focused on "outcome measures" such as student academic achievement and completion rates. However, what we believe has been missing is legislative accountability on how the CSU administration uses and expends student fee revenue and state general fund dollars.

How does the Legislature determine the success of a public institution if it is unable to account for how depleting state funds are being spent? For instance, "What is the balance of monies spent on classroom instruction, student services and college administration? How does this balance affect the success or failure of our students?"

Assessing accountability solely on the performance of faculty and students ignores how funding decisions and priorities enacted by the CSU administration can adversely impact a student's ability to academically succeed. "How" something is accomplished is as important – if not more so – then determining "what" was accomplished. And we believe the Legislature needs to play a more active role in holding the CSU administration accountable for its management decisions.

As an example, the CSU is in the process of implementing changes based on the "deliverology" model which has been referred to as a "shock therapy approach to change." Its goals are to increase the graduations rates of our students, and to close the achievement gap of students from underrepresented groups. Both laudable outcomes that would be supported by this body and the public. But if it is not investigated by the Legislature regarding how these goals are reached, then the outcomes achieved will become meaningless statistics with little basis for celebration.

For instance, increases to the graduation rate are being pursued at the same time that tens of thousands of qualified students are being denied access to a CSU education. This loss of access especially hurts Latinos and African-American students who are applying for admission in record numbers.

With a decrease in student enrollment – and without any other changes in the CSU's curriculum or graduation policies – graduation rates automatically increase because there is a smaller student body to draw from. A graduation rate of 40 percent, for instance, for a student body of 300,000 students, increases to 48 percent when the student body is reduced to 250,000 while maintaining the same number of graduates.

Closing the achievement gap is also a positive goal. However, if accomplishing this includes the elimination of student remediation programs or denying access to students who need such coursework – many of them first-generation in their family to attend college – then even though the achievement gap is ultimately reduced it has been accomplished by simply denying access to a select group of students.

Unfortunately, this scenario is already occurring at San Diego State University where the campus President has unilaterally decided that students living in proximity to the campus – who were previously given priority admissions – will be turned away in favor of students from outside the area.

This unauthorized change to an admissions policy that has been in place for over a decade will deny access to local students who lack resources to attend a college outside the San Diego region, and will primarily affect eligible students who are from poor districts.

Sadly, in an October 22, 2009 interview with KPBS News, San Diego State President Stephen Weber admitted the new admissions policy was also modified to address some of the campus's financial shortfalls by requiring students living out of the area to live on campus. "We have empty beds on campus," explained Weber, and "we have a debt service of \$6.4 million that must be paid."

So even though San Diego State will likely show improvements in both its graduation rate and closing of the achievement gap, it accomplishes these goals by admitting students with higher GPAs who live out of the area and denying access to less privileged students who have very few, if any, options to attend another CSU campus.

And finally, another area of legislative accountability that is sorely needed is the oversight of CSU management of administrative growth and administrative costs.

An example is the startling change in the full-time equivalency of administrative and faculty positions. In the past 10 years, while administrative positions at the CSU increased 20 percent, faculty positions increased by only three percent. In the past five years, the number of CSU administrators has increased eight percent, while faculty positions have been reduced by one percent.

The ratio of students to administrators is another issue where legislative accountability is needed. CSU campuses average one administrator for every 104 students. But this average ranges from a low ratio of one administrator for every 25 students, to a high ratio of one administrator for every 160 students. Therefore, questions to be considered by the Legislature include: "What should the ratio be of administrators to student enrollment?" and "How has this ratio changed over time?" These are especially critical questions when state budget cuts are resulting in tens of thousands of eligible students being denied access to a CSU education, and enrolled students witness thousands of classes being eliminated along with uncontrolled student fee increases.

Even the California State Auditor has been unable to provide adequate accountability. In its most recent findings about the CSU – findings that have included hundreds of millions of dollars in overrun costs, no-bid contracts, and hidden sources of executive compensation – the CSU refused to impose the Auditor's most recent recommendation by claiming that restricting some administrative travel costs would be "impractical." In its February 2010 report, the Auditor charged the CSU administration had "abdicated its oversight responsibility."

We believe it is the Legislature's responsibility to provide the necessary oversight and accountability to ensure state taxpayer dollars are being spent in the public's best interest, and to ensure its public university is truly a public institution.

Legislative accountability should hold the California State University administration accountable for how it spends its funding and student fees; it should question the appropriateness of CSU management decisions that are contrary to state policy; and it should provide strong oversight to determine whether management is fulfilling the CSU's sole primary mission in state law to provide undergraduate and graduate instruction.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.